

ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT

THE RISE OF AUSTRALIAN WHISKIES.

By Brendan Asher Pillai



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t is a generally held belief that the whiskies from Scotland and Japan are the standard bearers when it comes to quality and provenance and the benchmarks against which other expressions should be judged. However, there has been a noticeable shift in preference towards the lesser known whisky-producing regions of the world in recent years and Australia would definitely qualify as one of them.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Over the last 24 years, Australian whisky production has gone from strength to strength and the whiskies that have been produced by some of the distilleries have garnered some notable accolades. While these distilleries may have garnered these achievements on the basis of their sheer hard work and craftsmanship, they may not have existed today if it weren't for the actions of the legendary Bill Lark.

In 1992, Bill and his father-in-law Max were on a fishing trip in the highlands of Tasmania. Max produced a bottle of single malt whisky and as they were savouring it, Bill wondered why there was a dearth in terms of distilleries producing whisky in Tasmania.

LAWRENNY ESTATE DISTILLING CO IS AN UPCOMING DISTILLERY AND IS THE BRAINCHILD OF CAMERON AND KAREN MACE. WHEN COMPLETED, IT WILL BECOME ONLY THE THIRD “PADDOCK-TO-BOTTLE” DISTILLERY IN THE WORLD (AND SECOND IN TASMANIA AFTER REDLANDS ESTATE).



Lawrenny Estate Distilling Co. Derwent River



Photo by Gary He

Bill realised that Tasmania was the ideal setting for a whisky distillery as it possessed an abundance of good quality barley, soft and pure water, highland peat bogs and a favourable climate. But before he could proceed with his vision of producing exceptional Australian whisky, he first had to surmount a bureaucratic hurdle.

The Australian government had upheld a convicts-era ban on small distilleries operating within the country and it took some intense lobbying from Bill and his family in order for the ban to be overturned. Bill then quickly secured the funding for the project Lark Distillery was established that same year.

The establishment of Lark Distillery laid the groundwork for more to follow and in 1994, Tasmania Distillery was established. Bakery Hill Distillery was then established in 1999 and became Victoria's first distillery.

Another notable distillery, Overeem, was then founded in 2004 by Casey Overeem and his daughter Jane. The Overeem brand, along with Sullivan's Cove from Tasmania Distillery, Lark and Nant are seen as the established powers within the Australian whisky industry. Overeem Distillery was taken over in January 2014 by Lark Distillery but both businesses are run as separate entities.



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Redlands Estate in Tasmania, whose claim to fame is that they are one of only two distilleries in the world who practise "paddock-to-bottle" production where all their barley requirements are grown on-site and used entirely for production of their whiskies.



Photo by Gary He

THE RISE TO PROMINENCE

Australian whisky's rise to prominence from a global perspective began in 2012, when Nant Distillery's American Oak Bourbon Wood expression was awarded an impressive 95.5 points out of 100 in Jim Murray's Whisky Bible and Tasmania Distillery was awarded the title of World Whisky Grand Master at the Spirits Masters.

However, the moment which served as the catalyst for Australian whisky's elevation into the international spotlight arrived in 2014, when a bottle of Sullivan's Cove French Oak was awarded the accolade of The World's Best Single Malt at the World Whiskies Awards.

The accolades have continued ever since and 2014 was no different, with Lark Distillery bagging the Best Australian Single Cask Malt Whisky and Limeburners Distillery from Perth taking bronze for their single malt at the San Francisco Global Spirits Competition.

However, the awarding of a Double Gold to New World Whisky Distillery's Starward Wine Cask expression as well as the accolade of Best Craft Distiller Whisky for the same expression has meant that Tasmanian whisky now has a legitimate challenger from Victoria to contend with.

While these accolades have provided distilleries with the confidence to stay the course, it has had the knock-on effect of attracting the attention of speculative investors who are out to make a quick profit. However, the distilleries have been rather

steadfast in their refusal to price out the market in the wake of such accolades and the resulting price increases have been modest for the most part.

Currently, there are 16 distilleries within Australia whose primary focus would be to produce single malt whisky. When craft distilleries are added into the mix, the number increases considerably. Tasmania alone has a total of 17 large scale and craft distilleries in operation, with three further distilleries scheduled to come on-stream within the next year.



Photo by Gary He



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SIMILARITIES & DIFFERENCES

One of the fundamental differences between Australian whiskies and those from Scotland and Japan is the minimum maturation period. While Scottish and Japanese distilleries have a minimum maturation period of at least three years, Australian whiskies only have to be matured for a minimum of two years.

This would be due to the low amount of humidity in Australia and has the effect of causing the water within the casks to evaporate rather than the alcohol, thus resulting in a spirit with a higher alcohol concentration. The opposite holds true for Scotland and Japan, where the high level of humidity causes more alcohol to be lost via 'The Angel's Share' than water and resulting in a spirit with a lower alcohol concentration.

Most of the distilleries in Australia also source their malted barley from breweries in order to make up their requirements, although some have their own floor maltings so that they can keep the entire whisky production process under the same roof.

One of these distilleries is Redlands Estate in Tasmania. They are one of only two distilleries in the world who practise 'paddock-to-bottle' production and have their entire barley requirements are grown on-site.

Australian distilleries also tend to use a variety of different sized casks in order to produce a multitude of styles. Smaller casks of up to 20 litres are also sold to raise much-needed capital for the distillery's operations.

Due to the abundance of top quality wineries and vineyards in Australia, ex-wine casks are used rather widely across the whisky industry. While some of these casks are used as they are, others will be re-coopered according to the distillery's specifications.

The award-winning Starward Wine Cask expression would be a prime example of this as the distillery utilises re-coopered Australian Shiraz casks of up to 200 litres from one of South Australia's top wine producers. Another of Starward's standard single malt offerings is matured in ex-Apera sherry butts which have been sourced from another well-known South Australian wine producer.

Starward's parent company New World Whisky is also known for experimenting with different types of wine cask maturations and finishes in order to create unique offerings and they have largely utilised ex-sherry and ex-port casks to derive a multitude of small batch releases.

UPCOMING PROJECTS

While the established Australian distilleries will continue to dominate the awards scene for the foreseeable future, it would be worth keeping an eye on the following distilleries in the years ahead.

ARCHIE ROSE DISTILLERY

Archie Rose Distillery is Sydney's first distillery in 162 years. They commenced operations in March 2015. The distillery was founded by Will Edwards and produces a variety of spirits ranging from vodka, gin, rye whisky and single malt whisky. The first batch of single malt whisky is expected to be released in early to mid 2017.

The distillery also offers consumers the chance to create a bespoke spirit. More information regarding this can be found on their website.

BLACK GATE DISTILLERY

Black Gate Distillery was founded in 2012 by Brian and Genise Hollingworth. The distillery, based in Mendooran in New South Wales, specialises in fruit-infused vodkas, liqueurs, dark rum and has been producing a sherry-matured single malt whisky since 2014. The distillery recently released the 7th edition of Black Gate whisky, which is expected to be sold out very soon.

LAWRENNY ESTATE DISTILLING CO.

Lawrenny Estate Distilling Co is an upcoming distillery and is the brainchild of Cameron and Karen Mace. When completed, it will become only the third paddock-to-bottle distillery in the world (and second in Tasmania after Redlands Estate). Lawrenny Estate Distilling Co has actively engaged the expertise of both Bill Lark and Tim Duckett for distillery operations advice and is scheduled to start in April 2017, with its first single malt whisky release expected in mid 2019.

Consumers will be able to purchase either a Cask Strength offering which will be bottled at approximately 63% abv or the Distillers Select offering which will be bottled at 48% abv.

FUTURE DIRECTION

With the demand for Australian whisky increasing every year, it is anticipated that distilleries around the country will continue to expand their production capabilities in order to keep up with demand while ensuring that the quality of the whisky is kept at a consistently high level.

It is also anticipated that Australian whiskies will be more widely distributed in the years ahead, as distilleries are collaborating with large firms to leverage on their distribution network. This is already beginning to bear fruit as Diageo has purchased a minority stake in the Starward brand and are looking to assist in the export of the whisky to countries around the world.

Australian whisky caught the attention of the industry in 2014 when it won the accolade of Best Whisky In The World. The time has now come for the country and its distilleries to prove that such a result was not a fluke, but rather the first step in the rise of a new force in the whisky world.

Australian distilleries aren't the only whisky producers making waves, though. Independent bottlers such as Heartwood have been producing some truly exceptional releases over the last few years and the demand is so high that some releases sell out in a matter of minutes.

Heartwood's founder Tim Duckett works closely with distilleries across Tasmania in order to secure new-make spirit for future Heartwood releases and is seen as one of the legends of the industry due to his experience and his ability to craft exceptional whiskies time after time.

Heartwood purchases new-make spirit from various Tasmanian distilleries and transports them to a bonded warehouse, where it is re-racked into casks that are specifically selected by Duckett and left to mature until it is time to be bottled. Quantities are limited, as the independent bottler usually releases either single cask or blended malt expressions bottled at cask strength. This makes each expression a collectors item which tends to appreciate rather sharply in value after a few years.

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Photo by Tim Grant